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ABSTRACT

The effects of single parenting are explored in this paper. Single parenting is viewed in the overall framework of the risk and protective factor model, in which single parenting is viewed as one risk factor that can lead to unsuccessful adolescent academic outcomes. A historical perspective of single parenting is offered, with a focus on how such parenting affects academic achievement. The risk and protective factor model is then outlined such that it is possible to bolster protective factors and diminish risk factors. Some of the risk factors described here include the cumulative nature of risk, parental influences, and intelligence. Adolescent academic achievement and single parenting is highlighted, along with an analysis of how these two factors can be intertwined. Some of the implications of studies connecting single parenting and academic risk, along with certain flaws in some of these studies, are detailed. It is suggested that use of the risk and protective factor framework would avoid targeting single parenting as a definite risk, but would not fail to recognize that such parenting could have effects. Contains 15 references. (RJM)

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Effects of Single Parenting on Adolescent Academic Achievement: Establishing a Risk and Protective Factor Framework

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Effects of Single Parenting on Adolescent Academic Achievement;

Establishing a Risk and Protective Factor Framework

With the rising numbers of parental divorce and children born out of wedlock, increasing numbers of children will experience living in a single-parent household (Watts & Watts, 1991). Estimates indicate that over 60% of children born after 1984 will spend at least some time raised by a single parent (Compas & Williams, 1990). Averages find that most children living with single parents remain in this situation for about five years (Compas & Williams, 1990). As of 1986, over six million female headed households with children existed (Watts & Watts, 1991). Estimates indicate that these numbers have increased throughout the nineties and will continue to increase into the next century.

The result of this social phenomenon is the need for research on how single parenting affects children and adolescents. Researchers have hypothesized that single parenting might provide for social deficits in children's adjustment and achievement due to the lack of an additional parent and the discord associated with divorce (Marsh, 1990). Recent research has explored the effects on the children, as well as the stresses and problems it creates for the actual single parent (Compas & Williams, 1990; Kurdek, 1991; Watts & Watts, 1991). This information would help practitioners know what areas of intervention are needed to help serve this population.

Early research into the effects of single parenting focused on a "family deficit model" (Marsh, 1990). This model assumed that single parenting would cause deficits in children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. Since then, more recent research has approached the issue with a more open perspective, considering single parenting as one option for family structure along the continuum of family configurations (Marsh, 1990). Differences in

family structure, according to this approach, might not be detrimental to children's development. Single parenting, then, can be viewed in the overall framework of the risk and protective factor model. Rather than being defined as the cause of problems in development, single parenting can be identified as one risk factor that can lead to unsuccessful outcomes.

Practitioners can then design effective interventions with knowledge of which protective factors ameliorate this risk. Single parents can strive to enhance these protective factors, should single parenting prove to be one risk factor in the development of children. Single parenting can be viewed as one of a number of variables affecting the development of children's academic achievement.

Single Parenting Defined; A Historical Perspective

When researchers began to address the phenomenon of single parenting, they tended to view it through a "deficit family model" (Marsh, 1990). This model proposes that family configurations other than the nuclear family will produce unsuccessful outcomes for children. The earlier research was based on hypotheses that single parented children will not perform as well in school as children of intact families, nor will they have as high levels of adjustment. A negative effect of single parenting was assumed, and often found in the research results (Marsh, 1990). Additionally, if the research did not support the hypotheses, researchers would still argue that effects were so complicated that the design did not reveal them. Researchers did not suggest that perhaps single parenting did not have severe effects on the development of children (Marsh, 1990). This reflects the opinion at the time that the nuclear family was the only acceptable family structure for optimal child development (Marsh, 1990).

This research dates back earlier than 1973, when single parenting was referred to as

"father absence." Herzog and Sudia (1973) reviewed the literature associated with studying the effects of father absence on children's academic achievement and adjustment. The results from these studies indicate that single parenting had very little effect on academic achievement, especially when socioeconomic status and cultural background were controlled for in a control group. However, the authors still concluded that father absence had wide and far-reaching effects on children that were probably difficult to ascertain through the designs of these research studies. The authors did not accept the research results at face value, but instead interpreted them based on the family deficit model (Marsh, 1990).

In another review, Emery, Hetherington, & Dilalla (1984) found that children of single parents earned poorer grades than children of intact families. The studies in the review often reported that the results could be confounded by socioeconomic status, but did not address this issue in the statistical results. The results again were accepted within the "family deficit model." Another review by Shinn (1978) attempted to include only those studies that met minimally stringent characteristics. For example, the studies had to include longitudinal data to determine if academic achievement problems could have preceded the beginning of the single parenting situation (Marsh, 1990). Of those that met the criteria, 16 of 28 studies found some unsuccessful outcomes for children of single parents. These sixteen had small, yet significant differences between academic performance and test scores of the single parented and intact parented adolescents. In this review, however, three studies found some positive results associated with single parenting, such as single parents spending more time talking with their children, presumably due to the lack of time intact parents spend with their spouse. These previous studies and literature reviews reflect the focus on the "family deficit model" (Marsh, 1990).

More recently, researchers have begun to view family structure as a continuum of alternatives, each with their own strengths and weaknesses associated with the structure. Authors propose that all families have strengths and weaknesses, regardless of their structure. It is these strengths and weaknesses, they propose, that lead to differing outcomes in children's adjustment (Marsh, 1990). This focus is similar to a risk and protective factor model proposed by researchers studying the adjustment of children. In this model, family structure is seen as only one possible risk factor for children that can be ameliorated by other protective factors, or worsened with certain risk factors.

Risk and Protective Factor Model

Researchers have long been interested in identifying which factors promote risk in children for the development of adjustment problems, low academic achievement, and behavior problems. More recently, research has revealed the importance of knowing which protective factors seem to ameliorate some of the risk. Practitioners can design interventions to enhance the protective factors as well as decrease the number of risk factors. The development of the risk and protective factor model provides a framework to interpret the results found in studies of single parenting and their children (Seifer, Sameroff, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1992).

According to the model, risk factors do not have great specificity; rather their effects are multiplicative. Some research considering risk factors focuses on specificity, addressing risk in a linear nature. For example, researchers would ask if criminal behavior in a parent causes criminal behavior in their children? Although some effects of risk factors are linear, the far greater number are not (Seifer et al., 1992). In other words, the child of a criminal is at a much greater risk for other adjustment difficulties, in addition to a slightly higher risk for criminal behaviors. Risk

factors, therefore, are not generally linear, but multiplicative; they do not occur separately, but simultaneously.

Seifer et al. (1992) also propose that risk factors are cumulative; in other words, more risk factors are related to a worse outcome in adjustment. The number of risk factors are important, rather than which risk factors. Researchers, then, should focus on studying the multiplicative effects of risk, rather than the specific effects on one risk factor. According to this model, single parenting would be better defined as one risk factor among many that affect child development. Studying single parenting in combination with other risk factors could be more important than considering the effects of single parenting alone. Without this framework, confounding variables are not explored.

Several risk factors have been identified by the research into this model as affecting children's adjustment, achievement, and behavior. Examples include mental illness in a parent, high anxiety in a parent, low educational status of parent, low occupational status of parent, father absence, rigid parenting values, inadequate interaction style of parent, negative life events for child, minority racial status, and large family size. Risk is generally calculated by adding the number of risk factors a child experiences. Single parenting has been identified as one risk factor through the terminology of father absence.

When researching risk factors, inevitably researchers found many individuals who did not fit the model. In attempts to explain why some individuals with a great number of risk factors do not experience the negative outcomes, researchers explored protective factors. Research has revealed many possible protective factors that children experience, helping to ameliorate the effects of risk. Three main categories of factors have been defined: personality factors, social

support availability, and family cohesion. Personality factors such as an internal locus of control, temperament, and cognitive style have been proposed as protective from risk. The importance of social support has also been identified as helpful in combating risk. Family variables, such as communication and interaction styles, also seem related to the protection against risk factors (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin & Baldwin, 1993). Protective factors are also multiplicative, according to the model. The number of protective factors should be related to the decrease in effect related to the number of risk factors.

A study of children's intelligence illustrates the use of this model in studying the development of children (Sameroff et al., 1993). In order to assess risk, risk factors were defined and added together to gain a risk score. Risk factors included mother's behavior, mother's developmental beliefs about children, mother's anxiety level, mother's mental health, mother's educational attainment, family social support, father absence, family size, major stressful life events, occupation of head of household, and whether the child was of a minority disadvantaged status. The number of risk factors explained between thirty and fifty percent of the variance in intelligence score between the first and second assessment at ages four and thirteen. The authors proposed that results indicating that socioeconomic status and maternal education level were the most important indicators fail to explore what about these indicators is important. In their study, they controlled for IQ of mother, socioeconomic status, and race. Even after these variables were partialed out, the multiple risk score explained a large amount of the variance in intelligence score (Sameroff et al., 1993).

According to this model, single parenting is one risk factor that in combination with others could have multiplicative effects on the development of children, especially of cognitive and

emotional development. Arguably, protective factors must exist that ameliorate these effects. The strengths of each family, then, are more important than the actual configuration of family members. Additionally, the other risk factors present, such as low maternal education level and low socioeconomic status, are more important to study in combination with single parenting.

Adolescent Academic Achievement and Single Parenting

The academic achievement of adolescents has been explored in an effort to understand how single parenting affects achievement (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988; Marsh, 1990; Watts & Watts, 1991; Zimiles & Lee, 1991). These more recent studies are not framed in the "family deficit model." Instead, many variables are considered when attempting to explain cognitive development and academic achievement. The results of the research are inconsistent; some research indicates that single parenting provides for a slight risk in affecting academic achievement. Other studies find that controlling for economic hardship and certain other variables diminishes the effect single parenting appears to have on school performance. Certain studies find a slight risk, regardless of controlling for financial status. However, these latter studies tend to define socioeconomic status poorly (Blum, Boyle, & Offord, 1988).

Children of single parent families, when compared to children of two-parent households, have a slightly significant increased risk for poor academic performance (Blum, Boyle, & Offord, 1988; Zimiles & Lee, 1991). These studies found that children of single parents were more likely to have lower test scores, lower grades, and increased drop out behavior than children from intact families. Zimiles and Lee (1991) found the differences in test scores between the single parented children and the children of intact families to remain consistent over two years. From the sophomore year in high school to subsequent testing during the senior year, the children of single

parents performed more poorly with slightly significant results. However, the authors pointed out that the differences, while significant, were so small that they did not exceed the differences between male and female test scores. Larger differences were found between single parented children and children of intact families for drop out behavior. Children in single parent families were three times more likely to drop out or high school before graduation that children from intact families. These results were the same after the authors controlled for ability level (Zimiles & Lee, 1991). The authors suggested that other factors influence the drop out behavior in children of single parents because the grades and scores of the drop outs are consistent with their counterparts who remain in school. On the other hand, drop outs from intact families have lower scores and grades than their counterparts who remain in school (Zimiles & Lee, 1991). The authors suggested that some other factor in relation to single parenting causes the drop out behavior.

A recent study has attempted to explain the differences in achievement found between single parent and intact families. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that single parents spent less time helping their children with their schoolwork, presumably due to their increased responsibilities as a single parent. The authors also found that children of single parents received less encouragement for their work than the children of intact families. Additionally, single parents tended to have lower educational expectations for their children than the intact parents did. The authors suggest that children of single parents experience less consistent discipline and parental control, possibly leading to lower academic achievement. The single parented children in their sample did have lower achievement than the children of intact families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991).

However, Blum, Boyle, and Offord (1988) found that single parented children were more likely to live below the poverty line than children of two-parent families. Consequently, when controlling for financial status, the single parenting effects they found on school performance were no longer significant for most of the single parented children. Controlling for welfare status and maternal education also had an impact on the effects of single parenting. Not being on welfare and a higher maternal education provided some protective factors for the children. However, for three subpopulations, the single parenting risk still existed. Rural children, girls, and older boys still have slight, but significant effects for single parenting on their school performance. Blum, Boyle, and Offord (1988) suggest that children in rural areas are more isolated and have less opportunity. Girls are more often asked to perform household chores that could interfere with schoolwork. They suggested that risk increased for older boys because more time exists in their life for school failure to occur. These hypotheses need further study to validate, but do offer possible explanations for why these three subgroups have lower school performance than two parent families when economic status is controlled for.

Other studies have supported their results that financial status and other variables better explain the differences than does family structure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Cashion, 1982; Watts & Watts, 1991). Cashion (1982) found that single parented children had equivalent intellectual development as children of intact families when controlling for socioeconomic status. Watts and Watts (1991) also found that controlling for other variables better explained the differences found between the children of single parents and the children of intact families. Race, ability, and educational aspirations explained the differences between the children's academic performance. However, only the direct effects of these variables were studied. The authors did

not explore what factors shaped educational aspirations and ability (Watts & Watts, 1991). While Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that single parents were less involved in their children's schoolwork, they also found that these differences in parental behavior had little impact on future educational attainment. The educational aspirations and later achievement of single parented and intact parented children were not influenced by the family structure. Astone and McLanahan (1991) also suggested that family income influenced achievement. Their results indicated that somewhere between 30 and 50 percent of the differences in drop out behavior between single parented adolescents and adolescents of intact families is explained by differences in income and precariousness of income.

However, many studies indicate that single parenting causes risk for low school performance even when financial status is controlled for (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Liederman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985; Wadsworth et al., 1984; Zimiles & Lee, 1991). Children of single parents were more likely to perform poorly in school achievement and drop out of school regardless of economic status. However, some have suggested that these studies often use unclear or overinclusive definitions of poverty (Blum, Boyle, & Offord, 1988). However, Zimiles and Lee (1991) argued that in their study, although the differences decreased slightly when they controlled for income, the pattern still remained, indicating that family structure does impact school achievement. Additionally, their results on drop out behavior did not change at all when they controlled for economic status. These results indicate that economic status does not better explain drop out behavior than family structure.

These more recent studies address single parenting as one option among family configurations that could have effects on children's development. Most of the research indicates

that effects are slight when other variables, such as socioeconomic status and welfare status, are also considered. However, slight differences do exist in certain studies that are worthy of note when studying how single parenting affects adolescents.

Implications

The previous results from the more recent studies, in combination with those of the "family deficit model," indicate that slightly significant effects exist for single parenting on the academic achievement of adolescents. The results suggest that single parenting might be one risk factor when attempting to explain differences in adolescent academic achievement and drop out behavior. However, the literature also suggests that many other variables exist that better explain these differences. For example, socioeconomic status, race, welfare status, maternal educational level, ability of the adolescent, and educational aspiration of the adolescent better explain the differences in school performance among adolescents. Therefore, effects related to family structure are much less pervasive than earlier hypotheses suggested.

However, two main criticisms exist for the existing body of research studying adolescent academic achievement and single parenting. First, for research purposes, authors have tended to lump many family configurations into the category of single parent households. They have defined single parenting as one parent with one or more children in one household. Discrepancies are not often made between children whose parents have divorced and children whose parents were never married. Only a few studies address the changes associated with an incoming stepparent or with joint custody arrangements where children have wide access to two adults. Consequently, the research lacks strength without addressing these differences among family structure. Arguably, differences in development could exist based on whether the child

experienced a conflictual divorce versus never knowing one of his or her parents. Similarly, differences could exist based on the length of living with a single parent. These variations in single parenting are generally not addressed in the literature.

Second, of the existing studies of this phenomenon, over three fourths utilize the same database in their analyses. In essence, then, the results all come from the same sample of the population, weakening their additive impact on the literature. Most of the studies derive their data from the 1986 High School and Beyond Study by the National Center for Educational Statistics. While this is a large, national sample, the data was collected through self-report. The adolescents described their family configuration based on the choices provided for them on the answer sheet. The researchers were not able to access any other information about family structure. Thus, the data does not reveal how long parents were divorced, if they were ever married, and if the adolescent saw both parents regularly.

However, the results of the literature are consistent with an application of the risk and protective model framework. This framework can explain why small, but significant effects still exist in some studies for single parents after researchers control for socioeconomic status. In this model, risk factors are added together to determine the amount of risk a child has for poor achievement and adjustment (Sameroff et al., 1993). Rather than considering the actual risk factor as important, this model views the number of risk factors as the reason for risk. In this model, having a single parent might be one risk factor among many others that influence academic achievement.

When researchers partition out the effects of low socioeconomic status, welfare status, and other risk factors, the slight differences that still exist could be related to the multiplicative

nature of risk factors. That is, single parenting in combination with several other risk factors provides more risk than those risk factors alone. Without incorporating the other variables into the research design, the researcher would fail to access the true effects of single parenting on academic achievement.

Future research of the effects of single parenting would benefit from use of this risk and protective factor framework. The overriding framework would provide a model to use to design the research. Research is always more powerful and impacting when designed with a theory or framework in mind. Additionally, the framework would discourage a "family deficit model" by viewing single parenting as one possible risk factor among many others that influence children's development. This framework would avoid seeing single parenting as a definite risk, but would not fail to recognize that it could have effects. This framework also encourages the identification of protective factors. The effects that are or are not revealed of single parenting on adolescent academic achievement could be ameliorated if protective factors were identified. This knowledge would help single parents intervene to avoid negative effects on achievement. Lastly, by using this model, researchers will identify the other risk factors, that in combination with single parenting, affect children. These risk factors then can be decreased to provide for more successful outcomes for children.

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